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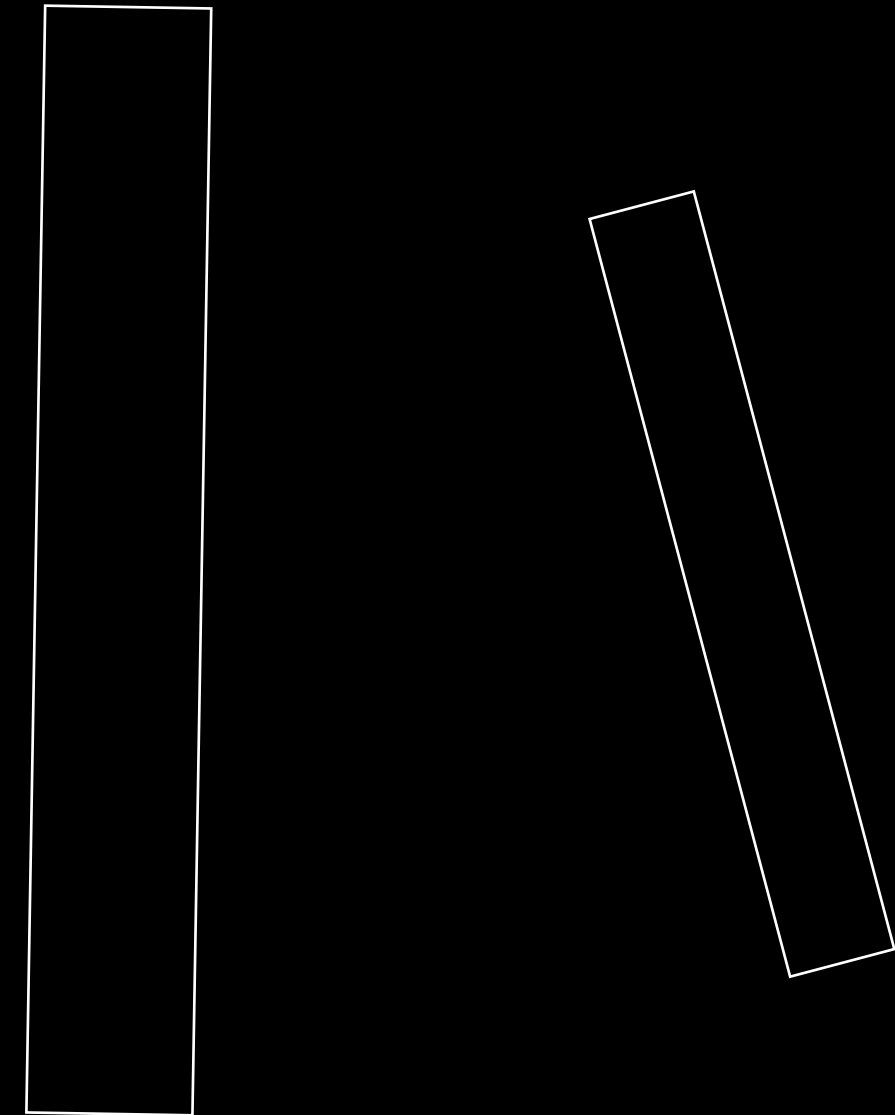
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13.1 LUCHTBAL & KIELSBROEK

Bovenbouw







THE ART ACT OF RECYCLING

Antonio Cantero, Stefano Corbo

BRICOLAGE. RECYCLAGE

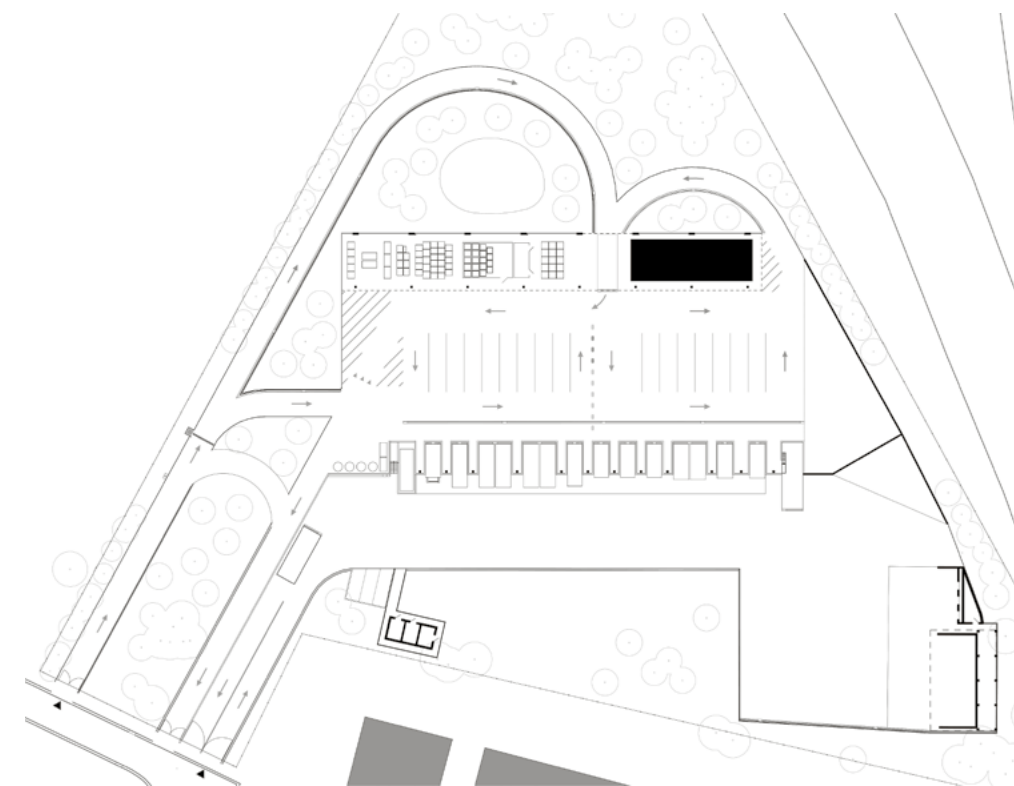
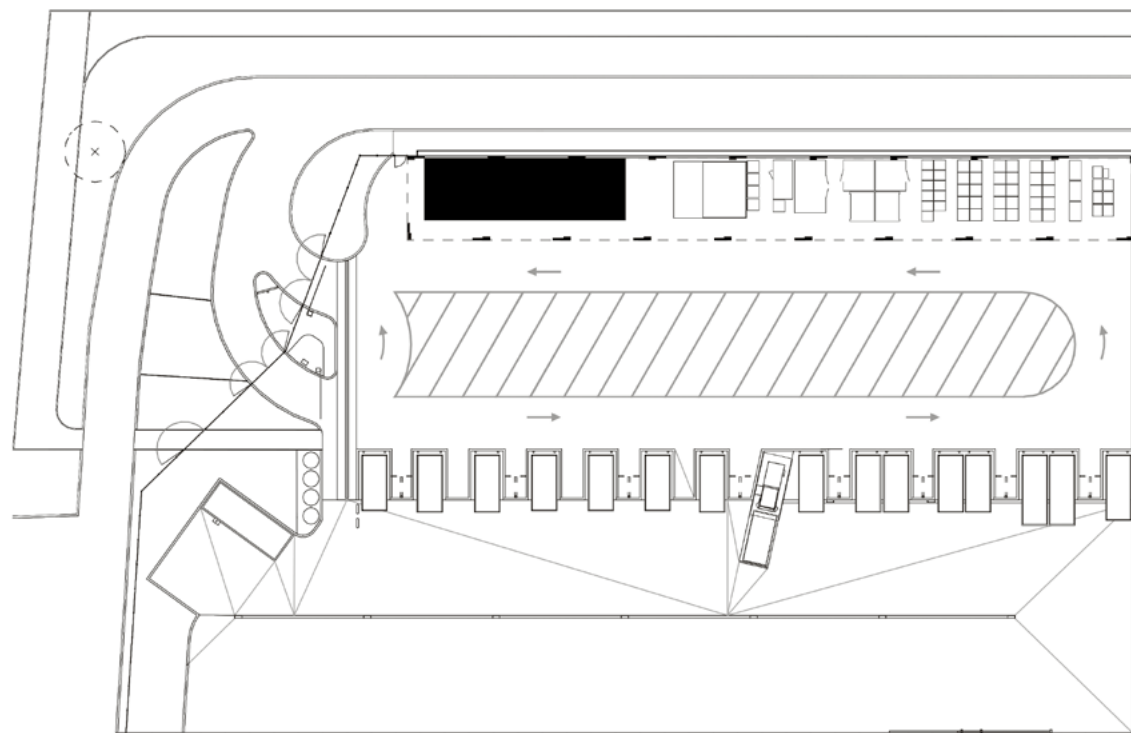
For at least two decades, words such as bricolage and juxtaposition have been immediately associated with postmodernist forms of architectural production – reckless spatial operations in which bricolage equalled fragmentation, historic appropriation, irony, and pastiche. In metaphorically representing a social and economic paradigm characterised by individualism, deregulation and the end of



the so-called “grand narrative”, the architecture of bricolage was criticised and ostracised, before eventually falling into oblivion.

Recently, a new cultural framework, as well as the urgency of dealing with pressing societal issues, has brought bricolage back to the scene. Driven this time by ideologically different goals, the literal operation of working with heterogeneous elements up to reduce them to a compositional unity has taken on a different meaning, becoming common practice for many architecture offices – especially among a generation of architects who have progressively built a conscious discourse based on social responsibility, economy of means, civic participation, and celebration of the ordinary.

Opposed to dramatic operations of *tabula rasa*, as well as to eclectic representations of reality, an increasing number of European architecture practices have faced the necessity of dealing with existing



elements that are widely available around us – whether those are materials, buildings, or simply traces and scars of the past – and incorporating them into design proposals that contain within them a multiplicity of signs and layers.

Bovenbouw Architectuur, an Antwerp-based office founded by Dirk Somers in 2011, belongs to this generation of architects. As the following pages will show, their repertoire outlines an incessant labour of mending, putting pieces together, working layer over layer, stratum over stratum, to unfold the complexity of reality through simple gestures.

At the core of their architectural production is the belief that the celebration of the everyday is not a simplistic depiction of reality, nor an act of turning away from responsibility or disengagement from broader societal issues. On the contrary, the work of Bovenbouw

Architectuur encompasses a constellation of solutions, strategies, and design operations that, in dealing with time, dialogue, and continuity, describe a sort of “and-and” position: one that tends to include and incorporate critically what is already available and that, at the same time, is extremely aware of the impact that design decisions can have on the built environment.

One might define Bovenbouw’s interest in the banality of the everyday as something close to an as-found approach, similar to an avant-garde process of questioning pre-established (architectural) canons. At the same time, Bovenbouw’s attitude is also influenced by what the Belgian critic Geert Bekaert called the commonplace¹:

1. See Dirk Somers, Maarten Van Den Driessche, and Bart Verschaffel. *Bovenbouw Architectuur. Living the Exotic Everyday* (VAi: Antwerp, 2019).



a notion introduced in 1987 to describe an engagement with the ordinary that involves a constant quest for poetry in any aspect of the everyday.

Over the years, such a quest has led Bovenbouw to develop a methodological approach centred on a sort of associative narrative, based on diverse fragments – old and new, public and private, introverted and exposed – which are re-assembled into a new context and provided with novel significations and roles. Depending on the type of project, Bovenbouw have, from time to time, accentuated the contrast among those fragments, created nuances, or generated forms of coexistence.

By playing with discarded materials and *objet trouvé*, Bovenbouw produce in their projects interrelatedness through apparent alienation, tension through juxtaposition, engagement through material



and visual stimulation. Most importantly, their projects express the inextricable connection between architecture and time – the unstable tension between duration and decay, permanence and disappearance, firmness and fragility.

Bovenbouw Architectuur's peculiarity also depends on the geographic context in which the majority of their projects are located: Belgium, a country whose complexity of identitarian and societal relationships pushes architects to interrogate themselves about what architecture can actually do and what its limitations are when dealing with pluralism, coexistence, and discord.

Because of this intricate political and cultural landscape, over the past years a wide range of architectural positions have emerged. To navigate each of these and to illustrate their main characteristics is a complicated task, and it would also distract us from the main



focus of this text which is to describe Bovenbouw's work. However, Bovenbouw's approach shares some analogies – conceptual and methodological – with the work developed by other offices in the same country in the past years – see, for example, the work of Rotor, a Brussels-based practice founded in 2005, which investigates the material environment and its reconfigurations using reclaimed elements; or, according to a divergent perspective, BC (Brussels Cooperation), a cooperative founded in 2006 which works on processes of upcycling – that is, how to generate products of higher quality out of originally poorer, discarded materials. Examples of these two approaches are the bricks developed by BC for the Design Museum in Ghent, which were created out of bits of broken glass and concrete²;

2. Gent Waste Brick for DING, "BC architects & studies & materials, accessed July 18, 2025, <https://bcmaterials.org/node/139>



or Rotor's intervention in Brussels for a socio-artistic organization called Zinneke. (2016), in which the building's rear façade is designed using reclaimed window frames and around 12% of all materials employed for the project are second-hand.

Repurposing building materials, however, is not necessarily a recent practice in Belgium. As Christophe van Gerrewey points out, in fact, reusing materials rather than throwing them away became a standard phenomenon during the twentieth century. Prior to that, sporadic examples can be found. Among them, "a study by Lut Prims and Ronny De Meyer has shown that in Antwerp, during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, a group of so-called *entrepreneurs de démolitions* was active, originating from Paris. A. Picart & Belleguy – this was their name – organised the sale of materials such as oak wood, pine wood for carpentry, tiles, flooring, paving stones, cross windows, doors, fireplaces, and everything



else related to buildings. Demolition material from medieval Paris was processed and dragged to the station of Antwerp in endless trainloads.”³

Nowadays, offices like Rotor and BC lead the way in experiments that place reuse at their core. If the act of reusing seems to be the common denominator between Rotor, BC, and Bovenbouw, then, after careful examination, some nuanced differences can be traced.

Within this landscape, Bovenbouw occupies a divergent position: while the office is perfectly aware of the ecological role that architecture can play, the way they express this awareness is somewhat confined within

3. Christophe van Gerwey, *Something Completely Different. Architecture in Belgium* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2024), 269.



the traditional boundaries of the discipline. Not as activists, nor as cultural provocateurs; but as designers who aim to rethink our relationship with the built environment through architectural form.

Therefore, rather than advocating for unrealistic processes of bottom-up design, or for moratoria on new constructions to problematise architecture’s environmental impact,⁴ Bovenbouw’s work acknowledges what exists and celebrates its sedimentation, through other forms and meanings, over time. In rejecting any ideological impetus towards architecture, architects, and their responsibilities, Bovenbouw choose not to withdraw, but to engage critically with reality in order to shape better spaces in which to live.

4. See Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, *A Moratorium on New Construction* (London: Sternberg Press, 2025).



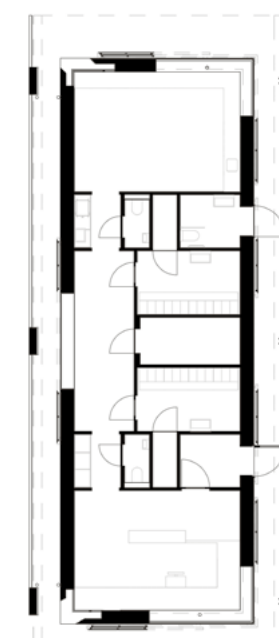
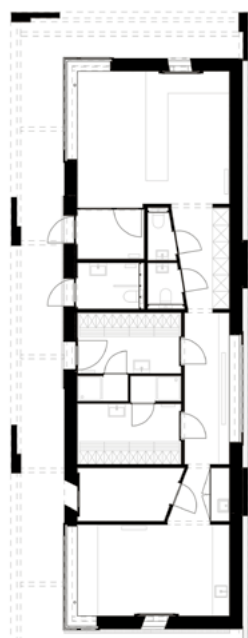
The two projects presented in these pages – the recycling centers in Luchtbal (2016–2019) and in Kielsbroek (2021–24) – epitomise this approach, by working ironically, metaphorically, and programmatically on the idea of recycling. Is recycling an architectural question? Can waste be considered an *objet trouvé*? How can architecture address issues of production and overconsumption?

A METHODOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

In 2009, Bovenbouw Architectuur won a competition organised by the City of Antwerp for the masterplan of its recycling centres. The office designed or upgraded five of the eight recycling centres currently present in the city (Kielsbroek, Deurne, Borgerhout, Berendrecht, and Luchtbal). Out of these projects, the two centres in Luchtbal and Kielsbroek constitute complementary manifestations of the same approach to recycling.

Similar in scale, layout and programme, both facilities include a series of repeating elements: a recycling square with large bins, a large mast structure that allows the different bins to be identified, a pavilion-like building that accommodates staff facilities and public services, and a canopy that unifies the different activities taking place on site, but also acts as a counterbalance to the fragmented landscape of the bins.

Besides their organisational principles, what the recycling centres Luchtbal and Kielsbroek have in common is also the use of similar materials: grey concrete, red industrial bricks, pine planks and laminated wood, and galvanized steel. The apparent banality of these materials in their singularity is contradicted by the overall effect that they produce once they are re-arranged into a novel and composite whole, which reveals their *raison d'être*, as well as hidden qualities such as their tactility, porosity, and tectonic articulation.



Seen from outside, the combination of these ordinary materials triggers surprising effects: in their juxtaposition, the rhythm generated by the steel columns, the perforated bricks, and the regular corrugated metal roofing constitute a symphony of elements that aptly describe Bovenbouw's attempts to find poetry in the banality of the everyday.

Similarly, in the interiors of the two recycling centers, the materials employed recall, for obvious reasons, the industrial world and its standardised processes; nevertheless, Bovenbouw domesticate these materials, by arranging them so that the spaces become warm, welcoming, and comfortable – a kind of domesticated roughness that allows the architects to design spaces not only for work, but also restrooms, changing rooms, and a reception. Furthermore, these interiors, despite their limited size, contain a multitude of small gestures that create unexpected visual connections and vistas – moments of spatial compression and decompression, of revealing and concealing

structural elements, as well as playful geometric collisions between walls and partitions.

In conceiving recycling centers as necessary facilities, economical constructions, and civic infrastructures, Bovenbouw demonstrate how waste management – from a material, programmatic and symbolic point of view – is a matter of architecture. Although for the facility in Kielsbroek no discarded materials could be employed in the construction process, the project replaced a smaller facility originally located a few hundred meters away, and some elements – such as the storage volumes – could be reused.

Beyond that, Bovenbouw dignify waste via architecture, by building playful, subtle, and poetic journeys through the notion of waste itself: waste understood as a resource, but also as a didactic activity in which visitors can engage with the variety of materials disposed of in the fa-



ilities, observing the spectacle of recycling. Waste management suggests a *modus operandi* – a way of looking at the world that embraces pragmatism, the optimisation of resources, and ecological awareness.

SEQUENTIAL FUNCTIONALITY

The design of the two recycling centres is informed by a constant tension between the variety of elements they comprise – functions, spaces, materials – and their overall organisational clarity. This duality aligns with Bovenbouw's attempts to balance the discrete and the unexpected, the ordinary and the meaningful. While in architecture the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements generates oftentimes excess, redundancy, and decorative superfluity, in Bovenbouw's case the compositional efforts at the base of their projects allow them to navigate this accumulation of materials and to find meaning in them. Juxtaposition is inscribed, in fact, within a general compositional order which is about specific codes and conventions that have



traditionally been part of the discipline's repertoire for centuries. Nevertheless, Bovenbouw regard these codes as something that can be constantly reinvented and questioned, depending on the project type and the context architects are working in.

In the two recycling centres, the ability to assemble diverse elements into a coherent formal ensemble also extends to how Bovenbouw address programmatic requirements, building spatial narratives that go beyond the utilitarian character of the architectures they design. These narratives unfold both in the general layout and in the interiors.

At the level of general organisation, their tripartite layout – comprising a mast structure and bins on one side, a pavilion-like building accommodating facilities on the other, and a square in the middle – follows a consistent, efficiency-oriented logic. This sequence of spaces



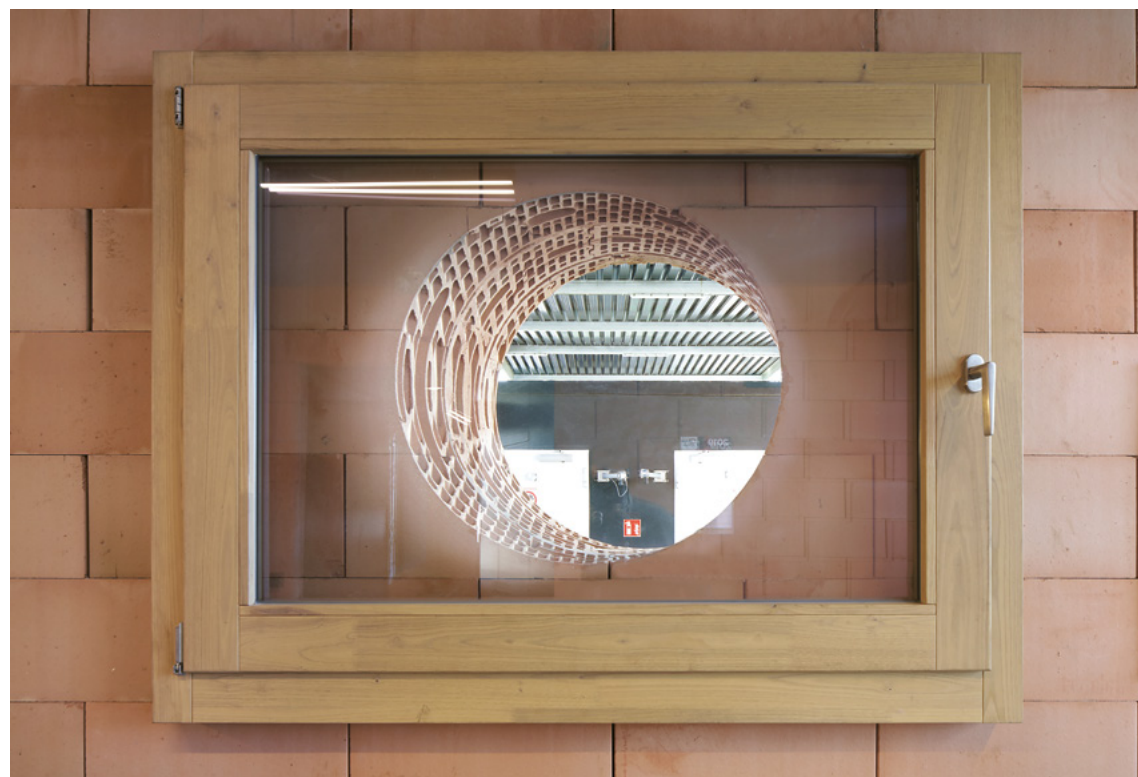
– a kind of microcosm, autonomous in its functioning – also pursues another aim: to build systems of relationships – visual, expressive, symbolic – within the context of diluted urbanity in which they are located, a condition marked by sprawl and fragmentation. Within this context, the recycling centres transcend their original function to become something more – civic landmarks within the surrounding landscape.

In the interiors, the dichotomy between organisational clarity and the diversity of elements employed becomes even more pronounced. Despite the modest scale of the buildings accommodating facilities for staff and visitors, the interplay of materials creates a spatial flow marked by both subtle and disruptive gestures: thresholds, pauses, changes in colour, or lighting conditions. Building components are framed in a way that celebrates formality and legibility. Most importantly, beyond their literal functions, these spaces offer an experience

that conveys meaning and complexity through the banality of the very elements from which they are composed.

In their orchestrated sequentiality, ordinary functions – reception, changing rooms, restrooms, and so on – and ordinary materials – wood, brick, grey concrete – are instrumental in defining an architecture that seeks meaning within the lexicon of the everyday.

In both Luchtbal and Kielsbroek, this sequentiality revolves around a shared spatial idea: the recycling square. Each site features a large open platform where visitors circulate by car, slowly advancing along a raised surface to deposit their waste into the containers below. This movement is not guided by signage or instructions, but by a sequence of architectural elements that give form and clarity to the action. Pavilion, canopy, and mast define the edges of the square, while retaining walls contain and direct the flow. The slight



elevation of the visitor platform makes the act of unloading both physically effortless and visually legible. Across the two sites, the architectural components remain consistent, though their spatial arrangement adapts subtly to the specific topography.

In Luchtbal, the recycling square is defined by a continuous platform with large bins arranged below. Visitors drive along the elevated surface, where the linear progression of deposit points unfolds with minimal friction. A tall mast marks each bin, providing vertical legibility and spatial cadence. The pavilion and canopy sit at one end of the square, clearly indicating the point of arrival. The use of rapid building blocks, grey concrete, pine planks, and galvanised steel lends the space a robust, industrial character. There is no hierarchy between elements, but rather a shared material language that emphasises directness. Monochrome accents – such as the white steel roof profiles and untreated timber



– reinforce the compositional clarity. The architecture does not signal sustainability. It performs it.

Kielsbroek introduces a distinct but related condition. The site's natural slope allowed Bovenbouw to elevate the recycling area relative to the containers without major earthworks. This topographic decision generates a circulation loop: visitors ascend, move along the edge of the square, and exit without needing to reverse or turn. The site is framed on one side by a canopy and staff building, and on the other by retaining walls and containers. The two edges function in parallel – one architectural, the other operational. An oversized laminated wooden beam connects the staff building to the canopy, creating a single gesture that unifies the entrance and its functions. The staff building is arranged as an enfilade of rooms, from reception to dining, with large corner windows overlooking the square. Two round drilled openings allow diagonal views of the comings and goings of



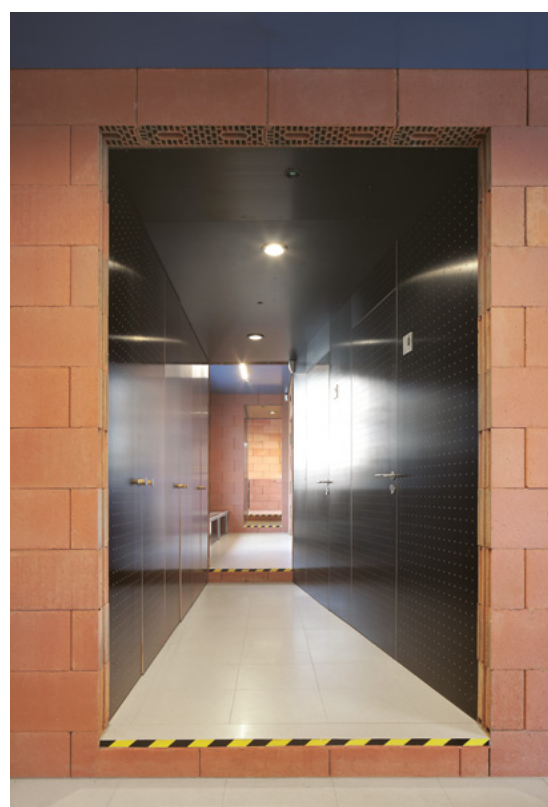
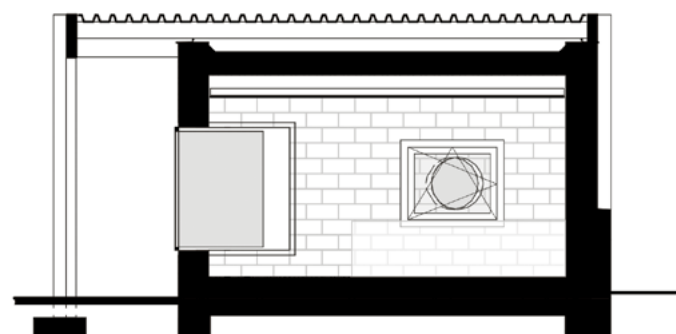
vehicles. These are not architectural flourishes; they are tools of orientation. From inside, staff can monitor the site without leaving their post. From outside, the building is not an object but part of a spatial system.

Overall, what Bovenbouw achieve across the two sites is a quiet consistency. Spatial sequencing occurs without reliance on signage or didactic interventions; rather, it emerges from the clarity of form, scale, and material articulation. The sequence transforms a practical activity into a spatial ritual, imbuing the act of waste disposal with dignity and legibility. The architecture supports this choreography by balancing repetition and variation, order and flexibility, structure and adaptability. These qualities combine to produce a spatial experience that is at once efficient and humane, formal yet inviting. Architecture organises behaviour through form,⁵ making the sequence of use intuitively clear without the need for explanation. It frames the ordinary without monumentalising it.



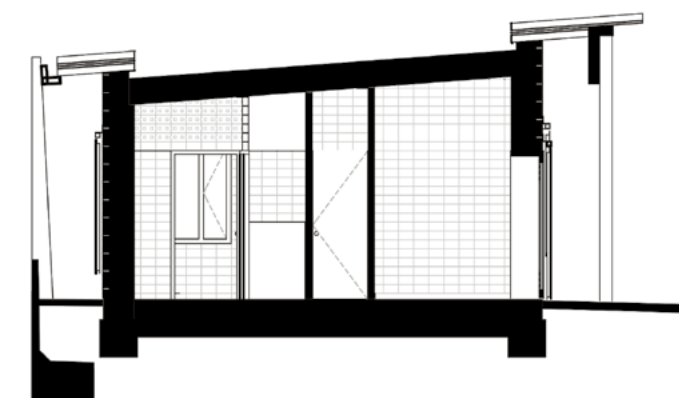
Sequential functionality, in this context, is not a design concept but a spatial ethic. It begins with the task of recycling and builds from there, using basic materials and repeated elements to support a process that must happen again and again. The canopy, mast, and platform form a triad that structures this repetition without rigidity. The visitor performs the same gestures in Luchtbal and Kielsbroek, but the setting is never generic. The sequence is adapted, but the function is preserved. This is infrastructure as architecture; measured, modest, and precise.

5. See Dirk Somers, Pieter T'Jonck and Christoph Grafe, "Interview with Dirk Somers: The Practice of Bovenbouw Architectuur", *OASE*, no. 109, 2021, p. 70.



THE AESTHETICS OF SUSTAINABILITY

The recycling centres of Luchtbal and Kielsbroek exist within an urban and cultural context marked by what can be described as a heterotopical condition. These sites are neither fully integrated into the city's everyday fabric nor completely detached. Instead, they occupy ambiguous territories that lie between infrastructure, waste management, and public use. Often overlooked and lacking the care extended to more celebrated architectural typologies, these centres face a legacy of marginalisation and invisibility. Bovenbouw's architecture does not seek to erase this reality; instead, it engages with it directly, shaping spaces that respond thoughtfully to such a complex condition. By embracing the heterotopic nature of these places, their work challenges the notion of recycling centres as mere non-places and reaffirms their potential as meaningful civic spaces, contributing to the city's collective life.



Sustainability in this context arises from a pragmatic yet poetic engagement with materiality, time, and programmatic necessity. It is not announced through grand gestures or ecological symbolism but is embedded in the deliberate articulation of architectural components and their relationships. The architecture emerges from the programme itself. Each functional requirement informs spatial organisation, material selection and form. This method resonates with approaches seen in projects like David Chipperfield's Neue Museum in Berlin, where fragments of ruin and the traces of history are preserved and aesthetically integrated rather than erased. Similarly, Bovenbouw treats industrial materials, discarded elements, and residual conditions not as deficits but as integral parts of a living architectural narrative. This process generates a language that is at once honest, measured, and richly expressive, reflecting both the constraints and possibilities of its context.



This design ethos reflects a conscious rejection of spectacle and monumentality. The two centres are not designed to impress or overwhelm but to serve with precision and civic responsibility. Their architecture is carefully composed to mediate between the functional demands of waste management and the cultural imperative to dignify this often-neglected domain. Through measured detailing, rigorous construction, and attention to the qualities of materials, Bovenbouw offer an aesthetic of restraint that conveys care without sentimentality. Their buildings do not beautify waste but dignify the processes and actions that surround it, rendering visible a respect for the ordinary that is rarely afforded to such utilitarian programmes.

Care in this context is understood not as an indulgent or decorative act but as an ethical commitment to programmatic clarity, material honesty, and spatial legibility. While the sites may not historically have been treated with special care, Bovenbouw's architecture

intervenes in this condition through precise, responsible design decisions. This is an approach to care that accepts constraints and works within them, producing architecture that is resilient and adaptable rather than fragile or ornamental. The projects in Luchtbal and Kielsbroek acknowledge the reality of impermanence, decay, and transformation, situating themselves within a continuum rather than a fixed endpoint. In doing so, they resist the premature closure of architectural narratives and instead open space for future change and adaptation.

This architecture's groundedness is further evident in its engagement with time and change. The two projects are designed to endure, to accommodate evolving uses and maintenance regimes without losing their coherence. This anticipatory capacity reflects a broader ecological sensibility, wherein sustainability is conceived as a process rather than a final state. The recycling centres in Luchtbal and Kielsbroek



are infrastructures in the fullest sense – supporting ongoing civic and ecological functions while remaining flexible enough to respond to shifting conditions and needs. This view positions architecture not as a static artifact but as an active participant in a longer temporal trajectory.

Ultimately, the two projects presented here challenge prevailing assumptions about sustainability and architectural value. They propose a model where beauty arises from rigour, continuity, and responsiveness rather than novelty or spectacle. Through a carefully calibrated interplay of form, material, and use, the recycling centres articulate an architecture that is civic in its ethos and pragmatic in its realisation. They reclaim the marginal and the banal, transforming it into spaces of quiet significance and ongoing social relevance. This subtle assertion reframes infrastructures often considered peripheral as integral parts of the urban and cultural fabric.



Such an approach offers a compelling counterpoint to more conventional narratives of sustainable architecture. It situates architectural practice within the everyday, embracing complexity, contradiction, and temporal flux. Bovenbouw's aesthetics of sustainability is inseparable from an ethics of responsibility – an ethics that recognises architecture as a continuous dialogue between material, programme, and place, shaped as much by what is preserved and reused as by what is newly made. In this respect, the work of Bovenbouw Architectuur exemplifies a deeply engaged, modest, and resilient architectural practice, attuned to the demands and possibilities of our time.